Perceived Identity: Applying Grounded Theory In Libraries

Chiara Faggiolani

Definitions

The full potential of qualitative research in library studies is increasingly being recognised in our country, encouraging a great deal of reflection on the new approach to Library Science in Italy which, having reached the limits set by exclusively quantitative research based on performance indicators, is seeking out more complex dynamics able to take into consideration subjective and psychological aspects of motivation, the needs and the users' perceptions (Moroni; Moroni and Vezzosi; Santocchini; and also a recent manual about research methods in library science, oriented to the qualitative approach: Pickard, *Research Methods in Information*). This present contribution is intended to be seen within this context as a proposal to synthetically illustrate the distinctive features and the potential uses of Grounded Theory (GT) methodology, in the conviction that it is one of the most interesting qualitative approaches in research.

GT is a research methodology, developed in the context of social research and inspired by the interpretative paradigm, which aims at exploring the meanings given to the phenomena which are the object of the research, making it particularly suitable for examining

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social processes and the underlying psychological ones. The theoretic framework of reference is symbolic interactionism[1] (Blumer p. 2) from which the focus of the methodology on the processes of attribution of meaning derives. They are not seen as individual processes but as the fruit of interaction between subjects. What is required of the researcher who uses this methodology is commitment to an interpretative activity able to shed light on the meanings attributed to the realities of the participants in the research: the approach to research through the Grounded Theory is focused only on discovery (Pickard, *Research Methods in Information*). In order to do this, the researcher enters the field of investigation unequipped with pre-existent theories, so that the research can be guided exclusively by data collected in the field during the investigation itself (hence the adjective *grounded*, implying rooted, based on data).

In summary, research carried out using GT does not limit itself to collecting and analysing data with the objective of verifying pre-existent hypotheses, but it aims at using the initial data as a starting point in order to construct in a creative way an explanation of the phenomena investigated. When considering the value of using this methodology in our field of research, the main motivation can always be traced back to the object of research. Prior to looking at the

[1] «Symbolic interactionism rests in the last analysis on three simple premises. The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. Such things include everything that the human being may note in his world – physical objects, such as trees or chairs; other human beings, such a mother or a store clerk; categories of human beings, such as friends or enemies; institutions, as a school or a government; guiding ideals, such as individual independence or honesty; activities or others, such as their commands or requests; and such situations as an individual encounters in his daily life. The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, modified through, an interpretative process used by person in dealing with the things he encounters».

issue of the method we find the object: it is important to understand the nature of the thing which is being sought and how that is carried out is a consequence, as the thing sought imposes the choice of the most suitable instruments to use.

The Object of Research: the Gap between Reality and Perception

> The agony to which we are condemned consists in never managing to reach with our action of service the level on which judgements are made about libraries. There is an enormous gap between the level on which we operate [. . .] and the level of subjective perceptions belonging to those who do and do not use them. On this level we are unable to exert any direct control, but we may only intercept, interpret and attempt to measure some of the "signals", and then perhaps decide to intervene on the first level – the only one which we have access to – in the attempt to offer corrective service, investing these measures with the responsibility to effect a change in subjective perceptions, in a tiring game of mirrors which has no certain outcomes (Rasetti p. 90).

One of the privileged fields of application in GT methodology in libraries is the examination of the gap, which Maria Stella Rasetti speaks about, the gap between what is actually done in libraries when carried out with the intention of offering efficient services and that which is perceived by the user. Within that gap we can find a series of agents which we may wish to define as out of control, among which associations, memories, similar experiences had elsewhere and other such factors linked – not coincidentally – to the characteristics of the reference context, which determine the formation of the perceived identity of libraries, or, to put it more simply,

to its reputation. A library's reputation is probably one of the most indigestible things which can be imagined: although it is sad to think in such terms, the truth is that perceived identity depends only partially on actions of service. It is built in a faraway place and one which is most difficult to access: the mind (and the heart) of the user. When the user comes into contact with a library, as in other services, and, more generally, in all acts of consumerism, affective filters come into play, along with cognitive ones: for this reason, the library will be perceived only partially as it actually is and partially how the user would like it to be. Another cause of the gap between reality and perceived identity can be found in the time factor:

> you can change location quickly but the image of that place will stay within you for years or even decades. [...] One of the reasons things change so slowly is that we, the public, stay very attached to our convictions: we continue to believe the same things about places that we have always believed, and we change opinion only very gradually and with a great deal of reluctance. There is something reassuring in those simplistic representations we have in our minds, and it takes a very definite change imposed on us by the outside world for us to form another idea and replace the old one with the new (Anholt p. 40-41).

From this point of view, perception cannot be considered a passive and automatic moment of reception of information by the users, but should be considered an actual act of selection and of active construction of the experience, starting with stimuli present in the environment, in close synergy with schemes, expectations and motivations present in the user himself (Russo). In order to identify and understand those factors which can be defined as the agents of the gap, the inadequacy of traditional investigation methods becomes evident: those interested in evaluation will be very clear about the fact that, if the investigation of user satisfaction finds the quanti-

tative instrument (questionnaire) to be an efficient technique for data collection, the investigation which proposes to examine the library-user relationship with the aim of understanding the most subjective aspects and underlying psychological ones related to the use/non-use of the service, he must undertake an activity of research characterised by the desire to look beyond and will be spurred on by the willingness to listen and will not limiting himself to carrying out an investigation. Regarding the tools one has at one's disposal, one might begin by stating all the thing which should not be done when dealing with an object of research as delicate as perceived identity: trusting yourself to foretell the answers means risking a dangerously self-referential vision and distortion of the reality. In the context of qualitative techniques – in-depth interview, focus groups and observation, to name the main ones – can be immensely useful, and the GT methodology, understood as a research strategy which uses these techniques, represents an unquestionable added value. These are the presuppositions at the centre of an investigation carried out between 2008 and 2010 on the user-base of four libraries belonging to the town library network of Perugia, with the aim of investigating real and potential user perceptions. This research will be used, as an example, without entering into details of the techniques used and the results obtained, but only as a means to expound with greater clarity some of the passages of the GT methodology.[2] Before dealing

[2]The space available does not permit a close look at the projectual phase of the research which foresees an articulation of the investigation on three different user profiles – actual, potential and opinion leaders – and the application of both qualitative and quantitative techniques, the latter to measure satisfaction with the service. Regarding the projectual phase of the research, it should be noted that continual contact with director and staff of the library being examined is absolutely vital. It is important to highlight this collaboration as the shared desire to look in depth at more subjective and psychological aspects linked to the user-base and the willingness to accept a new and rather invasive – as we will see later – form of research method is a necessary condition if the study s to have a rich and varied

with a description of the features of the GT methodology, it might be useful to take a look at its history.

The Discovery of *Grounded Theory*

It was 1967 when two American sociologists, Barney G. Glaser e Anselm L. Strauss, formulated an innovative method for carrying out qualitative research, describing its characteristics in a publication, *The discovery of Grounded Theory. Strategies of qualitative research* (Glaser and Strauss), which would later become the first universally recognised manual of qualitative research. As Glaser himself would explain, the history of the publication is in itself a *Grounded Theory*: although those were the years in which sociological research coincided with quantitative research, the book was never written, as we might have expected, in order to take a stance in the "qualitative vs quantitative" debate, but was created, as Glaser has often emphasised, from the practice of empirical research. Indeed, the publication came out following an investigation in which Glaser and Strauss were working on a particularly complex theme: awareness of death. It had been the very particular nature of the topic which had encouraged the two academics to develop a new methodology able to satisfy certain criteria. The method the two academics used was new in that it had been created in the field as an answer to the specific need for a wider (but not reducible) research, a difficult one (but not simplifiable) and uncomfortable (but worth exploring) (Tarozzi). We can observe, therefore, how the main characteristic of the methodology, that is to say being *grounded*, (based on data), is derived from

perspective complete with details of of the phenomenon, and will be an essential factor in the success of the investigation itself. It is also important to remember that the aspect which will be outlined further on are functional exclusively when used to explain technical passages of the methodology and do not exhaust the results obtained.

the particular context in which it was developed: from the hostility that sociology at that time reserved for qualitative research, from the need to to explore less usual contexts with non conventional instruments and from being truly catalysed by the practice of empirical research and not theoretical reflection. Over the years, Grounded Theory, from being a unique method has become plural and several different interpretations have emerged from the initial formula developed by Glaser and Strauss, who were, however, the first to leave the main path and assume contrasting positions. The classical approach of Glaser, who remained faithful to the original formula of the methodology, in contrast with the conceptual-procedural one of Stauss in the nineties, when he re-elaborated the methodology with Juliet Corbin, presenting one which was quite different to the original.[3] Over the last ten years, two more approaches have been added to Glaser's and Stauss's by those who are now dubbed the second generation, (the pupils of Glaser and Strauss): the constructionalist one of Kathy Charmaz ("Grounded Theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods, in Handbook of Qualitative Research";

[3]The procedures operative in Glaser's classic approach have been clarified in the text *Doing Grounded Theory* dated 1998 in which the author analyses in detail the different empirical passages which distinguish the classical prospective. In 1978, eleven years after the publishing of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Glaser has explained the procedures in another work, *Theoretical Sensitivity*, recognising that who use the methodology had greater need of procedural indications. Another source of information for classical *Grounded Theory* is the review, directed by Glaser himself, *The Grounded Theory Review* http://www.groundedtheoryreview.com. The operative procedures of the Strauss and Corbin, and now only of Corbin, after the death of Strauss in 1996, are clarified in the text which caused the break with Glaser, *Basics of Qualitative Research. Grounded Theory Procedures and Tecniques*, dated 1990, which was written in order to supply university students with an application key to *Grounded Theory*. Over the years, this text proved to be a very strong promotional instrument for the methodology which found itself propelled into numerous disciplinary contexts and becoming a *best seller*. The strength of the text is the ability to detail the passages of coding – *open, axial and selective*, making it more schematic and this easier to apply.

Constructing Grounded Theory. A practical Guide through Qualitative Analisys) and the situational and post-modern one of Adele Clarke ("Situational Analyses. Grounded Theory Mapping After Postmodern Turn"; *Situational Analysis. Grounded Theory After the Postmodern Turn*), who have fundamentally re-founded the methodology in an attempt to liberate it from all traces of positivism whilst maintaining its main characteristics intact. In anglophone literature we can find several contributions which illustrate the application of GT in LIS. The publication by Yazdan Mansourian suggests a reasoned bibliography related to the fields of application and demonstrates clearly how widely the methodology has been applied, in particular since the eighties, in studies related to information research behaviour (Mansourian; Powell; Selden; Pickard, "The impact of access to electronic and digital information resources on learning opportunities for young people"; Ellis).

The Distinctive Features of GT

The meanings which the expression *Grounded Theory* has been attributed with over the last forty years, from the moment of its formulation until today, are mutated by the favoured brief definition which Glaser and Strauss give in their introduction to *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*:

> a general method of comparative analysis – different from the more specific comparative methods now current – and with various procedures designed to generate grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss).

Although it is usual practice to refer to *Grounded Theory* as a combination of procedures for data analysis, here we wish to refer to it as a research strategy: a way of conceiving the process of scientific

research from the projectual phase (or research design), defined by the type of information being sought and by the use of determined instruments to gather such data.

The *Grounded Theory*, understood as a research strategy, tells us the way in which the qualitative techniques – interviews, observation, focus groups, etc. – must be used, offering a precise route to follow: the methodology is based on a process of research of a prevalently inductive character, in which the relationship that the researcher has with field-collected empirical data, disconnected as much as possible from theorical presuppositions, is privileged. The results of research carried out using these methods is a rational, dense, articulated and systematic theory able to explain the reality being examined. A theory of this type is not based only on "facts" but it supplies a sense of solid and deep anchorage, imbued with the vitality of a life experience (Tarozzi). For this reason, the theory which has been extracted from a *Grounded Theory* research has a great practical and applicable worth and is highly suitable, from a methodological point of view, to research contexts which require concrete and practical results and, therefore, even today the *Grounded Theory* continues to be successfully applied in those fields which take into examination new phenomena: as we have seen, the method was created from the bottom – from the practical level – it was built upwards towards the theoretical and its great success lies not in its theorical legitimacy, but in the results it is able to deliver.

Despite the multiple interpretations and declinatiosn which have emerged through the years from the original formula, several features can be considered distinctive in any grounded research; the recursion of the process of research, the theorical sampling, the conceptualisation and the codification, the presence of memos and diagrams.

Constant Comparison

The process of research in the investigation carried out through a quantitative approach is characterised by a linear relationship between phases which the researcher concentrates on in different moments: elaboration of the research question is followed by data collection, then by data analysis and elaboration and concludes in communication of the results. In this type of research it is possible to identify a linear sequence of conceptual, methodological and empirical phases which are quite separate and distinct. Qualitative research is characterised by a circular process which the researcher, although moving through the same four phases, can, for example, constantly reformulate the research design according to the data being collected, define the instruments used in the data collection according to the results being uncovered during the analysis phase, and take, therefore, decisions based on contingency and which are only rarely linear and planned beforehand (figure 1).

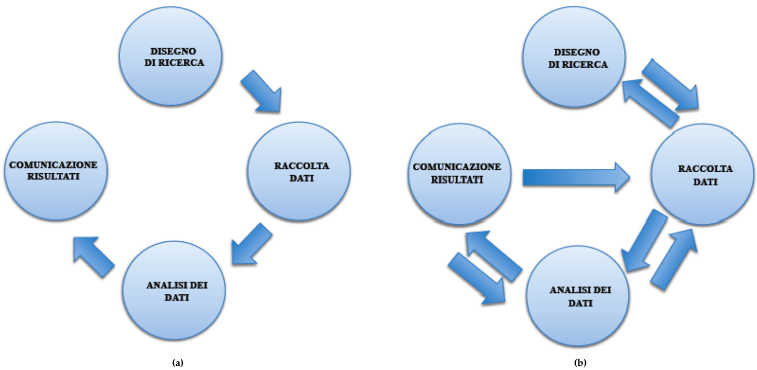


Figure 1: The phases of research in quantitative (linear) and qualitative (circular) research (Cardano).

In the case of *Grounded Theory*, the relationship between the phases of research is recursive and is best represented by a spiral (figure 2 on the next page). Recursion is a great point of strength in that it obliges the researcher to never take for granted the goodness of his investigation and forces him to constantly reflect on the whole of the research process, evaluating each phase according to other phases and reasoning on the efficiency of techniques and sampling instruments in relation to the goals being reached. If we use figure 2 on the following page as the reference point, we can observe the passages followed in this particular case study. The area to be investigated [1] has been identified as the users' (both actual and potential) perception of libraries. The aim was to understand which aspects intervene in the construction of the perceived identity of libraries and the relationship between this and service satisfaction. The questions which were the starting point for the enquiry [2] can be defined as generative: open questions which call on the interviewees to measure themselves against the library concept, starting from their own personal experience. In a GT research one always begins with a very wide-range, generic question in order that the focal point of interest emerges only as the investigation progresses.

The techniques used for data collection [3], were focus groups and semi-structured interviews (Losito; Gianturco; Cardano).[4]

The first results can be considered a background research: the impression that the researcher receives during this initial stage of contact with the reality being studied. Out of the background research will emerge problematic lines and critical areas which the researcher will come up against during the phase of access into the field of investigation. It is in this phase that the researcher contextu-

[4]The phrase "semi-structured interview" refers to interviews in which the researcher sets off with a general idea of the area interest and with a few research questions, guaranteeing the interviewee the possibility to express his point of view, introducing topics which were not intially foreseen.

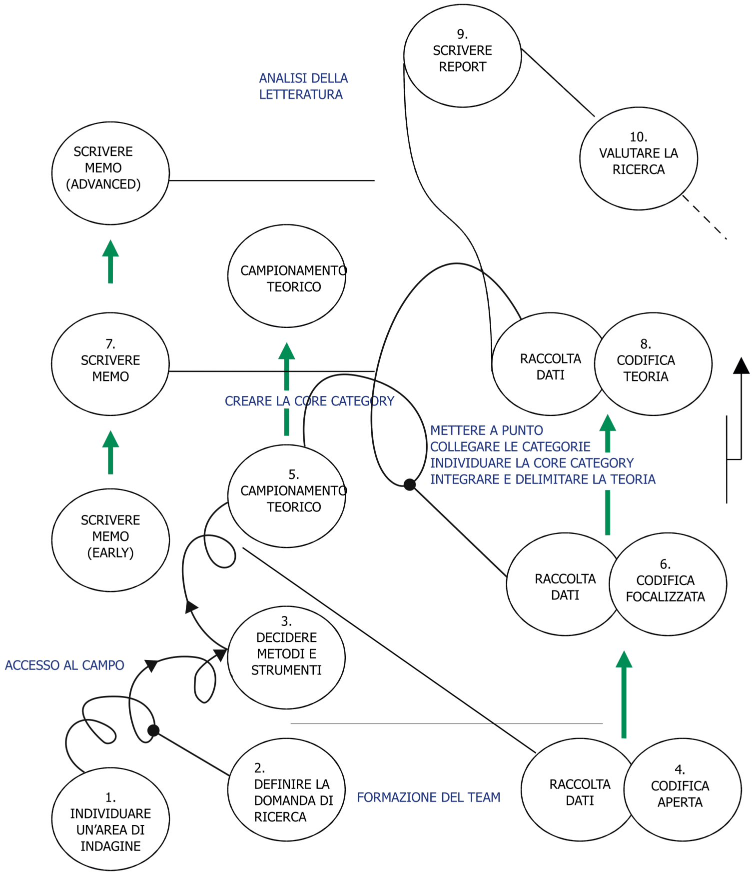


Figure 2: *Grounded Theory*: phases in the research process (Tarozzi)

alises the problem formulated in the design phase of the research in hand, adapting it progressively according to the empirical reality under examination, discovering aspects which will be focused on during the successive phases of data collection. In this way, from interview to interview, the questions become more targeted since what has already been defined emerges as the truly pregnant and significative fields in that specific field of context: they are those which will be defined "emerging questions" according to the theory. Looking at the specific example of the Perugia case study, it was the initial interviews with a group of opinion leaders which allowed the identification of several agents which would turn out to be particularly influential in the building of the perceived image of the libraries being examined, including some of general character (see a and b) and others linked specifically to the context of reference (c):

a) the stereotype library: it is rather obvious that the library still is, today, linked to deep-rooted stereotype which means that, as Valentina Comba notes, «no-one would ever imagine that the man with the Hawaiian shirt and sunglasses, letting himself go in a wild rock and roll dance is actually the director of a prominent library, nor that the woman with blue nails and a tattoo on her shoulder, mobile phone permanently to her ear and laptop constantly by her side even when lying by a swimming pool of a large hotel is one too. . . » (Comba p. 137). In general, libraries have been considered cold, detached, dusty and unwelcoming, especially by young adults;

b) the relationship with schools, often sees book being viewed only as text-book. It is seen, therefore, as something heavy, whatever its content actually is, inasmuch as it is something which is prescribed and thus the greatest risk is that the activity of reading as a learning activity overshadows the activity of reading for pleasure, which, of course, has a highly negative

effect on the use of libraries, seen in primis as the book place (Solimine);

c) the cultural offer in the context of reference: local cultural dynamics, the available facilities for young and elderly people and general social policies greatly influence perception of library services which cannot be seen in a strictly informative key and is, thus, judged also on a basis of deficiencies in facilities which libraries become involved in – rightly or wrongly – and are expected to mitigate those deficiencies. In the Perugia case study – a town with two universities – a key role is consigned to the university libraries.

Theorical Sampling

The choice of participants in an investigation for a GT research occurs with a sampling strategy which uses reasoned choice defined theorical sampling, in which the researcher avoids defining the sample through statistical techniques before actually beginning the sampling, but which during the research itself evolves depending on the representativity of the sampling itself relative to the themes which gradually emerge. We can speak of substantive representativity, undetermined by mathematical formulae but by the researcher's judgement leading him to choose which cases to investigate more fully, not because of their uniformity in relation to the population of reference but because of precise characteristics they possess or for the level of interest they appear to express: an interest which can alter during the course of the research, therefore the sampling should be conducted on the basis of the evolution of theorical relevance of the concepts (Strauss and Corbin).

Theorical sampling is founded on presuppositions which are

quite different from probabilistic sampling on a statistical basis, and is never finalised in the generalisation of the results: only as the activity of analysis of the data collected proceeds – the conceptualisation – can the researcher define which, and how many, are the cases of interest and proceed on to further sampling, until he reaches conceptual saturation. If we take another look at the case study and refer to figure 2 on page 12, we can see that it was the emergence of certain themes [4] – relationship with schools, the offer of university libraries and the town's cultural offer in general – which obligated the inclusion of experts [5] in these sectors: university professors, high school pupils, distance university students, events organisers and, in general, people who were particularly active in the town's cultural life. The concept of saturation is linked to the theorical sampling and represents a distinctive quality of the categories of the emerging theory in its final form. A GT research is considered concluded – and the sampling is therefore terminated – when analysis of the data found in the field reveals no new elements: this point is called "saturated" – when the data collected does not produce new properties and does not suggest new theorical intuitions in the researcher.

Encoding and Contextualisation

The fundamental operation which leads to the creation of a theory is not the description of data but the contextualisation which takes shape throughout the various phases of analysis of the data, and which is called, according to GT terminology, encoding. The process of data analysis is most certainly not a linear one, with a definite starting point and a finishing point; in fact, although this can be rather bewildering for the researcher, it is impossible not to think about the phase of data collection and analysis as two distinct

moments (Cicognani p. 31). An iterative procedure which foresees continual movement from the collection to the analysis of data: this is a characteristic feature of GT: the simultaneous development of the two practices (figure 3).

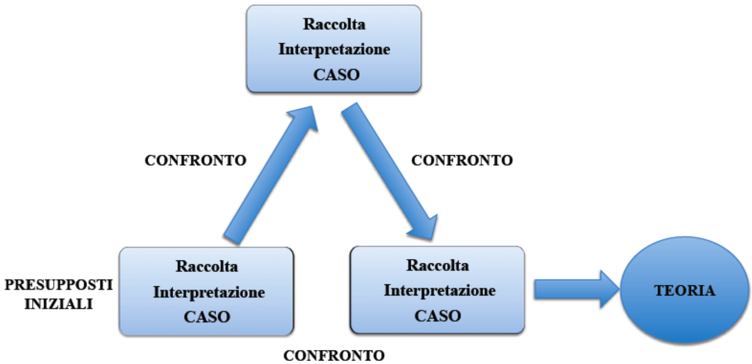


Figure 3: Constant comparison

There is, thus, no precise procedure to follow, however, it is advisable right from the data collection phase to proceed with the analysis, as the results will indicate how to perform the selection of the participants and the next phase of sampling: after having carried out the interview – which the researcher will take care to record – the next phase will be the integral transcription,[5] so that the data which the researcher will interact with will be nothing more

[5]The transcription of the interview is a delicate operation and although it may appear simple, it is full of therorical relections. It is done by passing from the recording of the verbal contribution to writing and knowing how to render certain non-verbal elements (posture, gesture) which may be useful to the research. For this reason, it would be beneficial if the researcher-interviewer tanscrbed the interviews himself. It is good practice to transcribe an interview immediately after it has been carried out in order not to forget important details and to be able to add them "still

than a written text. To simplify the process of data analysis, Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, in their re-reading of the *Grounded Theory* (Strauss–Corbin, 1990), distinguished three phases of encoding and supplied very precise procedure to follow: the passage from one to another, how to highlight the process of research, in a non linear way, but foreseeing constant returns to the work carried out, according to the logic of constant comparison. The three phases of encoding are schematised thus:

- open coding [4]: in this first phase the objective is to make sense of material which is still barely or not at all structured. The data are still those collected through sampling, registered and transcribed and presented in text form. It is a phase in which the researcher must approach the data with great flexibility and open-mindedness, in order to proceed to the definition of the first categories, which can, in a successive phase, be corrected, abandoned, modified, enlarged upon. The process of coding foresees the isolation of a string of text (quotation), subject to interpretation by the researcher and attributed with a code;

- axial coding: in this phase the categories which have emerged are developed and become more refined. This is the passage in which the «researcher moves constantly from inductive method (development of categories and concepts, search for connections) to the deductive one (verification of concepts, of categories, of connections)» (Chiarolanza and De Gregorio p. 21). Looking once more at figure 3 on the preceding page, we

warm" to the transcriptions – a series of notes on the impressions had during the interviews which might be useful during analysis. Like other phases of research, transcription must be kept in line with the objectives to be reached. Although there are different ways to transcribe which vary in their adherence to the orality f the interview, it is important to choose those most coherent with the aims (Gianturco)

see that in this phase, the process of coding foresees, starting with the first codes to emerge [4], the creation of codes of more general dimensions which define the meaning of categories which are conceptually wider [6];

- selective coding: the final phase [8] consists in identifying the central category – the core category – to which all the others are somehow linked, and the storyline, or rather, the high level conceptualisation. The categories in the final formulation must satisfy the condition of theorical saturation which, as was already mentioned, is reached when no further categories from the analysis work emerge and when the Grounded Theory can be adapted for all the data which has been collected.

In the codifying phase, the type of concepts which must be generated has two essential characteristics and which are connected to one another: firstly, they must be analytical – in other words, sufficiently general in order to create concrete characteristics of entity and not the entities themselves. Furthermore, they must be sensitizing, which is to say that they produce a significant photograph of the phenomenon under exam.

If there is no rule which determines the process of data analysis, likewise there can be no codifying technique: the sense of the single code and the function it will have in the analysis in general, must be built afresh each time, depending on the objectives of the research and on the interests of the researcher. What must be constantly kept in mind in the codifying phase is the cognitive objective which animates the research as it will be this which indicates the criteria of relevance during information selection.

The codifying process foresees data interpretation and code production which during analysis becomes more and more refined: in fact, in an initial phase more codes are produced than those which

will eventually be used to build the emerging research theory. According to Glaser and Strauss, this has three characteristics: it fits data, it is relevant and it works (Glaser and Strauss).

Although, as anticipated, in literature there often is a tendency to identify the Grounded Theory with a coding procedure, whereas, in reality, content analysis is only the last significant passage of a conceptualisation which begins in the very initial stages of the research and which cannot simply be made to coincide with data analysis procedure. In relation to coding, it would beneficial to take a brief look at software in qualitative analysis tests: the so-called CAQDAS (*Computer Aided Qualitative Data Anlysis Software*). It is, in reality, a true marriage between computer and qualitative research with the effect, on a methodological level, of increasing precision and trustworthiness of the researchers' classification, of being more rigorous from a scientific point of view and of controlling data which is considered to be one of the historical weaknesses of qualitative research. This software goes some way in reducing the difficulties which researchers have always had when managing large quantities of textual data. The most widely used are: *Nvivo* and *ATLAS.ti*, which was used for the data analysis in the case study under discussion. Also defined *Theory Building Software*, considered to be the one best to highlighting an innovatve approach to data analysis, ATLAS.ti works on two levels, making easily manageable qualitative data with activities such as the segmenation of the text, the coding and the recuperation of the text itself and, at a conceptual level, favouring the construction of a theorical model and contributing to maximise the potential of the qualitative approach in a creative way (Milesi and Castellani; Chiarolanza and De Gregorio; De Gregorio and Mosiello; Vardanega).

Memos and Diagrams

From a strictly procedural point of view, memos and diagrams are characteristic instrumental apparatus of Grounded Research. Memos [7] are notes taken about the research process which explain the passages of of contextualisation: they offer legibility and evaluation of the process of the research itself, representing an intermediate phase between coding and the writing of the final report. Although not appearing in the research report, they are extremely useful in the construction of the emerging theory as they assist the researcher to focus on the conceptualisation and to avoid losing himself in the analysis procedure, acting as a reminder of how he reached the elaboration of a certain category and documenting the coding work already carried out. Diagrams are rather characteristic of Grounded Theory research, inasmuch as their presence allows for the much simpler visible identification of the research carried out according to this methodology. Their capacity for expression and synthesis reserves them a special place in research reports [9], as they allow the representation and summary of processes which would be very difficult to express in words.

The *Ideal* Library and the Perception of the *Real* library

Regarding the the theme of the perception, one of the most interesting results to emerge from empirical research we have spoken of is the construction of the image of an ideal library: not objectively ideal, in the sense of the perfect library, or the nearest one can get to such a concept, but an ideal shared by the participants of the research. During the investigation it was discovered that, in defining the perception of the library being studied, the concept of an ideal

library was a recurring element, not only in the past experiences of the service, but also as a consequence of the weaknesses in the context of reference. In this way, the perceived identity of the four libraries studied emerged from the comparison with the concept of the ideal library in default.

Through the coding of collected material, gathered by means of interviews and focus groups, ATLAS.ti was used to elaborate a network (view figure 4) at the centre of which one can locate the core category which was traced through the concept of sociality.

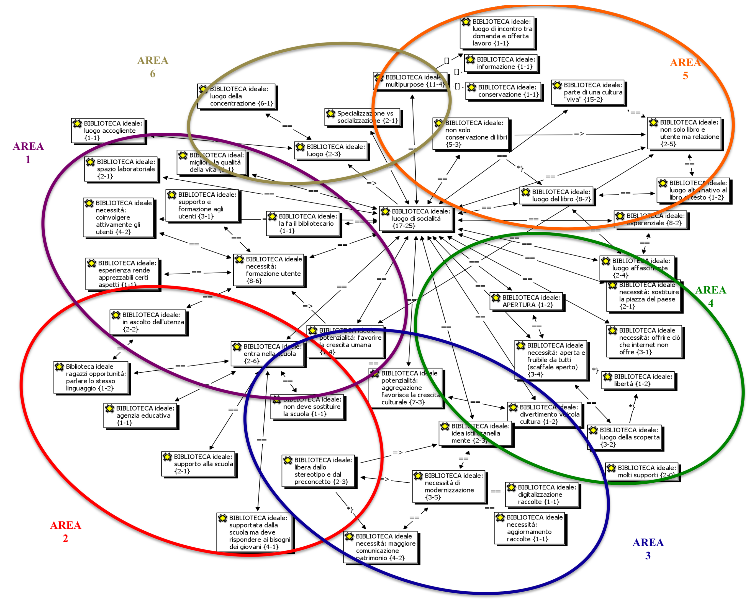


Figure 4: *Network view*: the ideal library. The conceptual network was elaborated with the software ATLAS.ti.

From the very first findings, it became immediately obvious that

the participants in the research were referring constantly to an ideal library, using the terms "place" and "space" rather than "service" giving the impression that the structural aspect of the library was predominant over the services offered. During the research, the idea of a physical place became increasingly present: a reference point for cultural activities but also a social centre for the area in which the users could satisfy personal needs regarding socialisation, entertainment, a meeting place, a space in which to relax, etc., whilst still carrying out the function of a place of the study and research which they had gone to the library to carry out in the first place, as the excerpt from the interview below shows:[6]

> It is banal but I believe that our libraries –and I'm talking about Perugia and perhaps all of Italy, although I don't know the situation on a national level so well– are extremely stuffy places. Not so much for the people who go there, but in the sense of the concept one has of the place. *The sacred feeling which [. . .]at times makes me think of a church, although perhaps it's got a bar and you're chatting while you do your research, whilst taking a look at a magazine about photography, whilst researching newspapers from 1900 to 1918[. . .] I mean, you do your actual research or something connected to your hobby, but you still have your needs and those needs don't cease to exist. A snack machine is fine but having a person to chat to, to socialise with, in that ten-minute break you give yourself is one way in which library services feel closer to the person and lets your experience be a better one* (Man, aged 35, events organizer).

[6] In qualitative research reports it is good practice to refer to excerpts of interviews as they are considered to be a guarantee of "inspectionability" and "value" of the research. Specifically the idea of libraries which emerges reminds one of the description which Anna Galluzzi proposes of the"urban and social library-space", as an «instrument for the rebirth of cities», in which the presupposition is traced back to *compulsion to proximity*, the need for physical meeting, the sharing of spaces and activities, to feel part of a social community» (Galluzzi).

Without examining the details, it can be seen how the concept sociality foresees a development in six main areas, which for convenience and clarity, are described separately but which in reality, as can be seen from the network view, present multiple points of convergence and over-lap:

1. user participation area (purple): the users ask to be taught through direct involvement, to be participants in a project aimed at improving the quality of their lives, in which learning is given space in a library experienced by the user as a laboratory space;

2. school relationship area (red): it has already been seen how the relationship with schools is central. The school is seen to be defective in its support of the library and at the same time the library is requested to support the school offer. In conclusion, the users (young adults particularly) wish to find within today's library an educational agency and not have the library as a substitute for school itself. They request that the library enter the school in a more conscious way as an auxiliary support to young people, especially – unlike schools themselves – taking care to speak the same language as young people, encouraging a rediscovery of books rather than textbooks (area 5);

3. area of change (blue): it expresses the need of modern library users which favours the digitalisation of its collection, to keep it constantly adjourned and in all digital forms possible (and not simply on paper), the valorisation of participation and formation of the user himself (areas 1 and 2). In reality the primary change is the one which regards making libraries look young which very often coincides with user request but which, due to poor communications, stays a prisoner of a stereotyped distant and detached (especially from young people) library

reduced to carrying out a marginal role. Users believe that libraries should be an idea instilled in the mind, linked to concepts of opening, curiosity, adventure and discovery;

4. area of opening (green): it can be observed how the library is seen as a door to the world. That opening in terms of service require open shelving to facilitate browsing which is vital if the library is to be experienced as a source of stimuli. Users ask the library not to copy the Internet but to better it, offering all those aspects which the Web cannot offer: community spirit, a physical meeting point (area 6), participation (area 1) taking its place as the centre of community life, like a town square (Agnoli);

5. area of cultural growth (orange): the users ask the library to be an integral part of a cultural revitalising project, through active participation (area 1), to redefine its relationship with schools (area 2), and to head in a direction of greater opening up to the social context it is found in (area 4), rejuvenating the idea of culture which has been locked away in the cupboard (area 3). From the point of view of services, this may happen by insisting on the social aspects which contribute to giving a community and social value to the library experience. Bars and restaurants are only part of the equation and extra services in line with library values such as collaborative filtering ad reading groups or, to give an example of book promotion, meetings with authors, events and activities which are too often kept apart from the services on offer (Ferrieri);

6. physical space area (brown): *in primis* it is important to be aware of how the library continues to be perceived by users as a place and therefore, aesthetic aspects, together with purely functional ones connected to furnishings, should be privileged

> and given great thought. In that physical space, which remains a space dedicated to book conservation, users ask the library to privilege the relationship and human dimension, asking to be accompanied on a learning path (area 1), and also to provide entertainment and an opportunity for personal growth (area 5). From this position the librarian becomes a central figure.

Leaving aside the specific case under discussion, it can be concluded that, in general, taking a closer look at the factors which weigh on how the identity of the library is perceived – and which can cause the non-use of the services – helps understand, in practical terms, what exactly causes the gap between perception and reality. One of the main reasons for which studies on perceived identity are so important is the banal one of ensuring that the image of libraries does not get left behind in times in which everything is moving at high speed. The result which can be obtained form this form of investigation allows us to understand if the gap between reality and perception can be closed through a careful communication strategy, or if the bad reputation is actually deserved and therefore, requires new managerial decisions to get things moving.

Several international investigations have shown how the problem with perceived identity sometimes lies in communications: it often happens that although libraries try to meet the needs of their users by keeping up-dated and maintaining a wide range of document variety, social spaces and cultural events, the cold and old-fashioned perception of the place continues to survive because communication about what has been achieved is insufficiently strong or because the external aspect of libraries is left unaltered (Moeschler; Evans, Cretin, and Camus). For this reason greater attention should be paid to psycho-social values, affection and emotional responses in library management as these aspects are stimulated and involved in many aspects of library services. In the eighties, Constance A.

Mellon, the first academic to speak of library anxiety, in a study carried out using *Grounded Theory* on 6000 American university students, concluded that in formative activities dedicated to users with the aim of consolidating the reputation of library services, that it was preferible to speak to the belly of students rather than the brain, aiming at reassuring them rather than filling them with technical information (Mellon). Nowadays, emotional and psychological aspects have greater weight in life in general than ever before and consequently libraries must pay greater attention to psycho-social, affectional and emotional responses which some aspects of library services favour. On the other hand, however, it is important to recognise that communication is not the magic pill for all ailments, nor is it a magic wand which can be waved over all existing problems: making a brochure or designing a new logo cannot be the remedy to close the gap, as the image perceived by the users changes when the library itself undergoes change, when something concrete is done to alter its state. Communication cannot substitute the change although it can help to transmit and consolidate it.

Conclusions: a Methodological Balance

Obviously the field of investigation of perceived identity is not the only one in which GT is successful: there are many different fields in bibliotechonomy in which the methodology can be applied, including analysis of the users' needs.[7] Generally speaking, when you apply GT, the objective is not to find an absolute truth but to

[7]Parise highlights he difference between community profile and analysis warning against considering the two practices analogous and emphasising how, despite the users' needs having become part of the professional terminology, the way in which these needs have to be investigated, identified and put in relation to documentary policies (Parise).

succeed in interpreting actions, interactions and emotions which emerge from the fieldwork and which the researcher attributes, thorough coding and comparison, with a precise meaning relative to the phenomenon being investigated (Pickard, *Research Methods in Information*). It would be perhaps useful to pause for a moment and take a look at that which can be considered one of the main critical points of the methodology: the deeply local character of a theory produced by GT could seem, in fact, to be a hindrance to the generalisability of the results it obtains. Indeed, if one decides to carry out a research with this methodology, the main objective cannot be the generalisation of the result, at least not in the statistical way we are used to thinking in: for the intrinsic characteristics of GT – above all the reasoned choice of samples (Gobo) – one can speak of transferability whose results from a grounded research cannot be extended (statistically) to the population referenced but can confirm and enrich the theorical knowledge previously acquired. This occurs through comparison – once again, the logic of continual comparison – which in our case-study confirms the utility of the practice of benchmarking, always advisable, whatever methodology is being used.

Glaser and Strauss introduced, relative to this issue, the concepts of substantive theory and formal theory in order to explain the gap between a theory with a strong local character, produced by an enquiry in a specific reference context (substantive theory) and a more general one (formal theory), generated by second-level abstraction and thus sociologically more relevant (Glaser and Strauss).

The concept of generalisability of the result is linked inevitably to the external validity of the research, a fundamental aspect, which in this paper cannot be adequately examined. It should be clear, however, based on what has already been stated, that a GT research – and qualitative research in general – cannot be judged according

to the standards of quantitative research, from the moment that the plausibility of the results depend on the use of a rigorously inductive procedure. For this reason, evaluation criteria , specific for this kind of research have been elaborated. Guba and Lincoln proposed a series of concepts corresponding to each of the principles used in quantitative research: credibility in place of internal validity, dependability in place of reliability, confirmability in place of objectivity and, lastly, transferability substitutes external validity (Lincoln and Guba). Regarding the advantages and limits in application of the Grounded Theory in purely instrumental terms, it can be applied in our field of interest as much as sociological literature outlines, although each time it is necessary to make a critical evaluation in order to avoid running into dangerous over-simplifications.

The advantages, as has already been seen, include how GT allows the discovery of important aspects of the human experience which remain inaccessible to conventional research instruments, offering the researcher extremely rich data, able to reveal the most meaningful attribute in the phenomenon being investigated. One strength of the methodology lies, in fact, in the adaptability to different applicative contexts which allows for the close examination of all those particular situations which, in the case of a uniform information collection procedure (such as a questionnaire) , would be lost, creating a homogeneous but incomplete picture of the reality studied. At the same time, we have seen how such a wealth is completely in the hands of the researcher who must be able to combine scientific rigour and creativity, using a flexible but careful and well-thought out approach. Precisely because we cannot rely on rigid and standardised procedures, as offered by a questionnaire, for example, this can be considered an intrinsic limit to the use of such an approach which is difficult to apply following only technical indications on guide-lines, and has to be practised and experimented in the field at

great expense of time and energy. Perhaps this, banally, is the main limit in library applications of GT and the qualitative approach in general as it requires a great deal of time and qualified, specialised human resources. If this approach can be a challenge for the *tout court* social researcher and a particular element of his activities, the same cannot be said of the librarian, who has to combine this part of his job with a wide range of other tasks which encompass purchasing collections to the conservation of document resources, from the activity of mediation to the development of services for the general public and must also deal with monitoring, evaluation and feedback. Despite these practical limits, it is necessary to begin to reflect on whether to enrich the methodological repertoire of the librarian by introducing these skills, especially if the aim is to increase greater sensibility and awareness of the active role libraries can have in society. Characteristics of GT – as in the qualitative approach in general – are, in fact, historical and contextual awareness which allow the examination of library-relevant historical facts, introducing new interrogatives which require answering, permitting comprehension of the variety of meanings which an apparently homogeneous institution like a library can have, depending on the context of reference and the social community in which it is based.

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About

The author

Chiara Faggiolani
Università degli Studi di Roma La Sapienza
Email: chiara.faggiolani@gmail.com

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